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# ‘SO THOROUGH A MUSICIAN’ REVIVING THE LEGACY OF ANN MOUNSEY BARTHOLOMEW

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The year was 1883, the zenith of Victorian imperialism. Following his triumphs in the Anglo-Egyptian War of 1882, General Lord Wolseley of Cairo was celebrated across Britain. But who would be worthy of composing a fitting musical tribute to such a distinguished figure? Perhaps one of Britain’s most revered composers, someone whose reputation matched the stature of the national hero? Surprisingly, the honour went to Mrs Ann Mounsey Bartholomew.

According to *The Musical Times* of 1 January 1883, she ‘composed a fitting march’ for the pianoforte, which, with its ‘bold’ theme, ‘more than matches the resources of a military band.’<sup>1</sup> High praise indeed for a composition by a woman who, until recently, has been virtually unknown outside specialist circles, despite having a Wikipedia page and an entry in Sophie Fuller’s *The Pandora Guide to Women Composers*. She was an outstanding Victorian musician, and her contribution, especially to church music, more than deserves a status equal to that of her male contemporaries.

## EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Ann Sheppard Mounsey was born in Soho, London, in 1811. Her father, Thomas Mounsey (1767–1849), was born in Penrith, Cumbria, and made his way to London via Witney, Oxfordshire, where he met and married Mary Sheppard. A keen amateur violinist and a licensed victualler, Thomas was associated with The Grapes, a lively public house and music venue on Old Compton Street. Recognizing Ann’s musical talent, he enrolled her at Logier’s Academy, 20 Bedford Square, Russell Street, when she was six.

Johann Bernhard Logier (1777–1846), considered something of a charlatan by the musical establishment,

had previously tried his luck in Dublin before moving to London. A novel aspect of Logier’s teaching was the use of a ‘chiroplast’, a device placed over the keyboard to ensure correct finger and hand positioning. He also taught large groups of pupils simultaneously, enabling him to earn substantial fees from a single session. Whatever the criticisms of his system, Ann clearly flourished under his tutelage. Indeed, when Louis Spohr (1784–1859) visited the academy in 1820, he was immediately impressed. Ann, who had already toured with Logier as one of his star pupils, impressed Spohr with her ability to harmonize and perform. Spohr wrote of her compositions, ‘As her harmony was unquestionably the best, I accordingly inserted it in my memorandum book.’<sup>2</sup>

Although only 10 years old, Ann came to the attention of artist, composer and socialite Maria Cosway (1760–1838), who invited her to join her seminary in Italy.<sup>3</sup> However, this offer was politely declined. Over the next three years, Ann continued her musical education, developing a passion for the organ under the guidance of Thomas Attwood (1765–1838) and later Samuel Wesley (1766–1837). Both men had connections with Felix Mendelssohn and the prominent publishing family Novello, connections that would prove invaluable as Ann’s musical career flourished.

## ORGANIST AND COMPOSER

At 18, Ann began applying for positions as a church organist. Contrary to modern perceptions of the period, it was not unusual for very young women to occupy prestigious roles. For example, Miss Stirling was appointed organist at All Saints, Poplar in 1839 at just 20 years old, and Ann’s sister, Elizabeth, became organist at St Peter, Cornhill at the age





Figure 1: Old 100th as it appeared in Ann's *Sacred Harmony. A Collection of Psalm & Hymn Tunes, Chants* (1860).



Above: Ann Sheppard Mounsey, engraving, likely after the photograph by T. Coleman, from the *Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians*, Volume 1, edited by John Denison Champlin (1888).

of 14. Ann set her sights on a city church and applied to St Vedast, Foster Lane in 1829.

The audition process was rigorous, with one of the tasks being to present a harmonization of *Old 100th*. While the version I have found in Ann's publication *Sacred Harmony* (1860) was published long after the audition, it is possible this is what she played, with its characteristic interludes (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, she was narrowly beaten on this occasion by another woman, Annie Hill. Later that year, Ann was appointed to St Michael, Wood Lane. This post was, for all intents and purposes, an inferior one, and she was not well treated, even enduring a salary cut in 1834.

Undeterred, Ann reapplied to St Vedast in 1837. This time, she was successful and went on to hold the position until 1883. Ann was highly respected at St Vedast, commanding a respectable starting

income of £40 per year, with an additional £10 for teaching the children.

Ann was still a teenager when she began composing. However, it was during her time at St Michael that she started publishing her hymns and other service material. In *A Collection of Sacred Music as used at St. Michael's Church, Wood Street*, for example, she contributed a tune to Isaac Watts's text 'When I can read my title clear', adding one of her signature interludes (Figure 2).<sup>5</sup> Ann continued to compose hymn tunes, anthems and other service material throughout her professional life, publishing both single-author collections and collaborative works with her sister. Many of her tunes are named after places associated with her family, such as *Witney* and *Penrith*.

It is evident that Ann was well known in her time. In *Congregational Church Music with Psalms for Chanting*, her name appears first on the title page,

ANN S. MOUNSEY.

Figure 2: 'When I can read my title clear', originally published in *A Collection of Sacred Music as used at St. Michael's Church, Wood Street* (1840).

*How has it come to pass that a prolific female composer, famous and feted in her day, has been overshadowed by her male contemporaries?*

When I can  
read my ti...tle clear To man...sions  
in the skies I bid fare...well to ev...ry  
fear And wipe my weep...ing eyes.

2

Should earth against my soul engage,  
And hellish darts be hurl'd,  
Then I can smile at Satan's rage,  
And face a frowning world.

3

Let cares like a wild deluge come,  
And storms of sorrow fall,  
May I but safely reach my home,  
My God, my heav'n, my all.

4

There I shall bathe my weary soul  
In seas of heav'nly rest,  
And not a wave of trouble roll  
Across my peaceful breast.

ahead of notable composers such as J.B. Dykes and J. Goss.<sup>6</sup>

Ann had a considerable reputation as an organist and was firmly in control of musical affairs at St Vedast. In 1852, a new organ was commissioned from the builder Joseph William Walker, and Ann specifically requested the inclusion of a trombone pedal. This addition increased the cost by £30, but even so the joint committee agreed to her demands. This fact dispels the long-standing myth that it was deemed inappropriate for women to play the organ with pedals. Ann now had an instrument that rivalled any in the capital, including the one at St Peter's, Cornhill, where her sister was the organist.

### 'SO THOROUGH A MUSICIAN'

Beyond St Vedast, Ann's reputation continued to grow among the musical elite. She managed a series of sacred concerts at Crosby Hall, a prestigious venue on Bishopsgate Street. It was at these concerts that several of Felix Mendelssohn's works were performed for the first time, including *Hear My Prayer* in 1844. One of Ann's own compositions, *A Dismission*, was also featured in the same programme. However, contemporary reviewers noted that 'the organ failed to bring much pleasure ... [T]he tone is reprehensible ... A general murmur ran through the hall that so thorough a musician as Miss Mounsey should be compelled to exhibit on a mere apology for the noblest of instruments.'<sup>7</sup> This criticism led to the commissioning of a new organ, and Mendelssohn maintained his association with both Crosby Hall and Ann.

William Bartholomew (1793–1867) was introduced to Felix Mendelssohn through the publishing company Novello. A working relationship between Ann and William soon blossomed into a close

friendship. Their most famous collaboration is the English version of *Elijah*. Ann married William Bartholomew in 1853, and this power couple of the day continued to work together, producing songs and oratorios, including *A Nativity* (1855) and the sacred cantata *Supplication and Thanksgiving* (1875). Sadly, William spent his later years as an invalid, and after his death, Ann lived quietly with her sister.

Of her compositions, only a few hymn tunes continued to be used in evangelical hymn books into the 20th century. Her great works – her oratorios, song cycles and service material – have all fallen by the wayside. As my research continues, I ask how it has come to pass that prolific female composers such as Ann Mounsey Bartholomew, famous and feted in their day, were completely overshadowed by their male contemporaries. We must remember that this is a more recent trend and does not fully represent the ambivalent attitude of the musical establishment towards women in music in the 19th century. For example, in *The Musical Times* in 1909, we find an impressive list of women whose names are now unknown to us.<sup>8</sup> My study of Mrs Ann Mounsey Bartholomew will show that her stature more than justifies her place on this list.

Gillian Warson is currently writing a full biography on the life and music of Ann Mounsey Bartholomew, which will be published by Peter Laing in 2025. More information and updates on her research can be found on her blog: [www.gillianrwarsonorg.wordpress.com/mrs-ann-mounsey-bartholomew-1811-1891](http://www.gillianrwarsonorg.wordpress.com/mrs-ann-mounsey-bartholomew-1811-1891)

<sup>1</sup> Percy Scholes, *The Mirror of Music 1844–1944: A century of Musical life in Britain and reflected in the pages of the Musical Times*, (1947), 730.

<sup>2</sup> *The Musical Keepsake for 1834, Vol 1*, Longman & Co., for the Proprietor

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ann Mounsey Bartholomew and Elizabeth Mounsey, *Sacred Harmony. A Collection of Psalm & Hymn Tunes, Chants* (1860).

<sup>5</sup> J. Banner and Ann Mounsey, *A Collection of Sacred Music as used at St. Michael's Church, Wood Street* (1840).

<sup>6</sup> *Congregational Church Music: A Book for the Service of Song in the House of the Lord* (1871).

<sup>7</sup> Betty Matthews, 'Mendelssohn and the Crosby Hall Organ', in *The Musical Times* 114, no. 1564 (1973), 641–3.

<sup>8</sup> 'Lady Organists, and One in Particular. Miss Ellen Day', in *The Musical Times* 50, no. 793 (1909), 163–6.